

Grins guaranteed

Linda Andrews tells us why a training course Cheshire Cat can put a smile on your face, whatever your level of skill

How many people work at Cheshire Cat?

There's me, Linda Andrews, I'm an RYA INWIC instructor, and my partner Mark Edwards, a Mobile Marine Engineer and Boat Safety Examiner. Our turnaround course on Saturdays are Mick, Nikki, David and Gary.

How many boats does the company have?

Five in all, a hire fleet of four, plus one boat for training and weekend hire. We can take up to three students on a course.

How did the company start?

We worked for other hire companies and always

thought, 'One day we'll have our own', I had long wanted to do training courses, but needed a suitable boat and premises. Then the company Mark was doing Saturday turnaround for wanted to sell up. It was already called Cheshire Cat. We'd always planned to call our company Rainbow Narrowboats, but we realised 'C' would appear higher up in alphabetical listings than 'R', and the little smiley cat is friendly, so we kept the name.

What courses do you offer?

I do the RYA helmsman certificate, but this takes two days: one day training, one day of assessment. As a more cost-effective option, most people choose our One-Day Boat Handling course. There's no certificate, but you learn

how to steer and manoeuvre the boat so they are prepared for the next junction, lock or winding hole.

Lots of people do a two-day 'whole immersion course' before buying a boat to find out if it's for them. You'd be surprised how many people buy a boat as a retirement project even though they've never been on one before.

We also do a Know Your Boat course. The RYA diesel maintenance course has to be done in a classroom with a model. That was hard to arrange and it's not the same as being bent over on a boat, feeling the tension on the spanner. So our engineer comes to your boat with the parts and shows you how to service the engine. It's also an opportunity to ask any questions about the boat.

Do your students know each other before they come on the courses?

We often have three strangers on the training boat, but by the end of the day they're exchanging contact details and they have some friends on the waterways from the start.

What level of experience do most people have?

We get everything from people who've never clapped eyes on a boat to people with 40 years' experience.

We're getting a surge of experienced people coming for the RYA Assessment because the CRT has really sharpened up on certificates for volunteers for charity boats, helmsmen for hotel boats, or work boats.

What can you offer those with plenty of experience?

We do find that even the most experienced people can learn something, maybe it's the knots, or just 'I hadn't thought of that'. For example, not reversing the boat when it pulls forward while descending a lock: if the gear



Worral Aquatic Society member, Alex Hardy, on call at the helm

could break at that moment, you'll go full-speed astern, straight into the wall.

There are so many accidents that can happen, including new and bizarre things. We heard about a couple both pulling ropes from the bank, but one of the ropes was over the gearlever, knocked it into gear and the boat set off down the canal without them!

Why do you hold ladies' training days?

Because men hog the tiller! Ladies are often nervous – I don't know if the men give the impression there's some great mystique to handling the boat – but they blossom if you get them away from the man. I find women are much better at the knots. It's important to learn some knots because you need to be able to tie a knot quickly, that won't pull tight and that you can undo in a trice.

I believe you've taught two autistic boys?

Yes, on different occasions, they were both brilliant. It's good for them to be able to achieve something and gain some confidence.

Do you teach children?

They can do the RYA crew course. It's dependent on height; they have to be tall enough to see over the boat and to wind a lock, but we've had some very enthusiastic eight year olds. At 12 to 13, they are great at steering; they're not so hard-wired into using a steering wheel. But under a certain age, they can't read situations and plan

ahead, so they need to be supervised. It's great to get them into the countryside and they learn respect for canals and locks. They learn social skills – that's what boating is all about really, working together. And they learn about safety and the importance of always wearing a lifejacket.

Has there ever been anyone you couldn't teach?

No, some learn slower than others, and everyone visits the bushes, but I've never thrown up my hands and said: 'This really isn't for you.'

Should everyone have a course before they take out a hire boat?

No, I think that would kill the hire industry, and the type of people who are likely to do irresponsible things, such as lads on a stag weekend, wouldn't listen anyway.

Do you live on a boat?

We did for nine years, but since we had the hire company we just ran out of space. Now we live in the loc cottage on the flight where I used to work. So we are as near to the water as possible without being on it, and we get away when we can on our own boat, Josephine Collier, named after my mother.

What's the best way to contact you?

People can have a look what we do on the website cheshirecattraining.co.uk. Because we're often out and about, the best way to contact us is by email on info@cheshirecattraining.co.uk or they can call me on



Linda Mack and training boat Little Star



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